

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Just the Right Word

Genesis 1.1-3, 27.30-35; John 1.1-5, 14; Matthew 4.1-4; Hebrews 4.12;

1 John 1.1-3a; Revelation 19.11-13

Russ Dean, November 9, 2008



After my freshman year in college, I returned for my second summer at McCall Royal Ambassador Camp, where I was the staff member in charge of Cabin 6 – right there in the middle of camp, on the left, across from the Unit 2 Bathhouse. (If you don't know what R.A.'s is, you clearly were not raised as a Baptist in the south!) This boys camp in the mountains of South Carolina was formative for my faith development and my social development. For nine summers it occupied my life. Amy and I spent our first three married summers there – honeymooning with 225 male campers a week, and a whole house load of Southern Baptist college boys! That near-decade shaped my life in many important ways – even though my current theology, and my tenure here at Park Road Baptist Church, have landed me on the blacklist of preachers. I can now only come for day visits. The pulpit of that beautiful chapel on the mountain, overlooking Lake Chillywater, is officially off limits.

One of the best things about life in those mountains was all the interesting adults I met. Pastors, missionaries, denominational employees, and the fathers who came to deliver their sons – some who stayed as counselors for the week. John Wright was one such father. We spent the week getting to know each other, and before he left he gave me a business card and an invitation. If I needed to make any money, a part-time job awaited me at Computer Dynamics, on Wade Hampton Boulevard in Greenville. Since I spent most of my college weekends bound for home, where Pastor #1 was always waiting, as it turned out, I did need some money. So I looked John up, and the rest is history. For three years I swept the floors, and stocked the shelves, and gradually learned enough in the tech room, where I spent every free minute, to become the tech manager. And a full time job in that capacity, after graduation, paid the bills for the newly weds, for two years, while Amy finished college.

I loved my job there. I had become a virtual whiz-bang at Microsoft's Disk Operating System, and a pretty good technician, hardware installer, and software trainer. The tech room was my favorite place, for not only did the salesmen gather there when they weren't making calls or answering the walk-in traffic, but we had some interesting locals who loved to hang out, too. One was an older gentleman named Lou. Lou had a background in computers – from the old days of punch cards – and loved to hang around and see all the new stuff. (Way back then that first 10-megabyte hard drive we unwrapped (with 65-millisecond access speed) was virtually beyond comprehension!) Lou was a nice guy, and we all liked him. And though he was just one of the guys in the shop, somewhere in Lou's past (I never learned the full story), he had been burned in a chemical accident. One full side of his face bore this tragedy in a grotesque kind of red and purple mask that had distorted his eye and engorged his face. From one side he was a distinguished 60-year-old Jew; from the other, some kind of text book specimen or a horror show character.

One day in the office, not long after Lou started coming in, in one of those, thankfully few, but unforgettable lifetime "Oopses," Lou made mention of a Furman connection. I forget now, some family member on the staff, or the like, which caused him to be a frequent visitor to the campus. "Oh," I said, in a moment of simultaneous clarity and stupidity, I had seen Lou before, I knew I recognized him. But those weren't the appropriate words that came out of my mouth. Instead, I offered the truly unbelievable: "Oh... I knew I recognized your face!" (Yes. I really did say it!)

You know. You just can't get those words back in once they've come out! Like trying to put toothpaste back in a tube. It just won't happen. And once they are spoken, words are just as tangible, just as immovable as that huge rock – under which I would like to have crawled at that very moment! And words are just as alive as was Lou's kind laugh and his quick-witted forgiveness of a terribly embarrassed friend.

Words. Amazing. Hardly anything can top their beauty. Michael Podesta and a few other calligraphy artists have tried to capture this philosophical truth as a visual truth – such as the word

“Alleluia,” printed on your bulletin and spelled in a perfect circle of perpetual praise.¹ Words. Sheer beauty. Yet... hardly anything can descend below their hideous harm. I know of no other word which conveys such anger and malice, such hatred and a loathing built on superficial injustice, such disgusting rejection of God’s good will one for another, as the now infamous “n-word.” It is a word which instantly ignites the air with spikes of piercing pain and in six simple letters conveys the full depth of a centuries-old failure to simply be human.

Words. Sheer beauty. Unimaginable horror.

The ancient Hebrews knew of this sheer beauty and unimaginable horror. They believed in the power of the spoken word. The universe was formed on the power of God’s spoken word. “*Let there be... And there was...*” (Genesis 1). They knew the living force of a word. Once Esau’s birthright had been spoken by old, blind Isaac, once those living words had been uttered, they could not be retrieved, nor reversed. The power of the word of blessing, and the word of curse was great. The spoken word lived, breathed, quickened to life, and punished with death.

Why do we believe it is not so, today?

Cry “fire” in a crowded theatre, and see if the power of the word has diminished. Educators know that too many children today continue to be cursed by words. Labels that brand. For life. “Slow learner.” “Trouble maker.” “The brother of so-and-so.” Once spoken, those curses are hard to break. Bright children, unfairly, if understandably labeled, generally follow the path of those words of curse – not of the blessing that should be theirs through a bright mind and a world of opportunity.

¹ We printed on today’s bulletin one of Michael Podesta’s magnificent calligraphies of scripture. This one is the single word, “Alleluia,” but the word repeats five times, the baseline for each of the letters composing a circle. The art is truly beautiful, with the letter “l” reaching upward, as if in an offer of praise, and the perfection and perpetuity of the circle offers an unmistakable message all its own.

I would be willing to bet that every one in this room could name a word which has changed your life. A word – maybe a single word – which set the trajectory of your living, determined the course of your life. A word of compliment which encouraged action. A word of criticism which thwarted enthusiasm.

Benji Taylor was an active, healthy, typical boy who was a member of the youth group at First Baptist Church in Clemson, SC when I was the youth minister there. Benji enjoyed all the things that boys enjoy, and was blessed with a good mind, and a wonderful family. He was a good student, a likeable friend, an avid athlete. One day on the golf course, one word changed Benji's life. In his senior year of high school, Benji had put on a little weight, and though he was by no means fat, he was a little heavier on his frame than he had always been. One day an opponent teased him as he walked, out of breath, down the fairway. "Come on... fatso."

Benji said in his mind that day, "No one will ever call me fat again." And he made sure of that. When we buried Benji about six years later, the maddening disease, bulimia, which took his life, had reduced his healthy frame to less than 80 pounds. One word. You may think the ancients were superstitious with their belief in the literal power of blessings and curses. But you cannot convince me they were wrong. Words still have that power.

(I feel the need to say that I am disturbed and anxious by some of the words I have heard, and continue to hear, relative to the election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land. Given the specific history of racial violence we have experienced in this nation, a violence bolstered by the power of words – and not so long ago as to have lost their meaning – I am anxious about the language that was used during the recent, bitter and divisive campaign. Words that continue to be spoken, even though the contest is decided. Words incite. They have always

had that power, and even in the world's most advanced, supposedly sophisticated and educated nation, they still have that power. The last thing we need in this nation is a tragedy of presidential proportion, so I urge you – I do not care what your political persuasion – to remember the power of words, and to interject words of hope and peace and unity into the conversations you hear in the office, neighborhood, or club. Your word may be the word that changes the world.)

Words have power. More than armies or nuclear weapons. More than money. More than looks or charm. Words may be the most powerful force on the earth. It should be no surprise, then, that when a gospel writer we call John, sat down to pen the story of the one who had set his world upside-down, he chose a metaphor of cosmic proportion, and of intimate design. A word of world-changing power to express the church's highest praise, for whom they believed Jesus had become.² New Testament scholar Gail O'Day says of this powerful prologue to John's gospel, "John 1... is not theological speculation about the character of the incarnate Word, but the testimony of those whose lives have been changed by the incarnation."³ (p.526) Do you remember my sermon on Trinitarian experience?⁴ This text is not speculative, abstract theology. John is trying to set into something of a literal context the concrete, living experience the first followers had with Jesus. And by the time that experience came to him, writing around the end of the first century after Jesus' death, the experience had reached cosmic proportion.

² My Christological bias can be detected in this statement, i.e., it is my understanding that who Jesus is, is a matter of theological development – the Church came to affirm about Jesus many theological tenets that his living disciples could not have affirmed. By the time John wrote, approximately seventy years after Jesus' death, a full Christology had developed, and we find the expression of this, probably supremely stated in all of the New Testament, in John's prologue: *In the beginning was the Word... which became flesh and dwelt among us.*

³ Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume IX, p. 526.

⁴⁴ "Trinitarian Experience," May 29, 2008, was a defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity from an experiential perspective, i.e. that the doctrine developed not as an abstract theological doctrine, because the people had actually experienced God, first as Creator, and then in a unique way in Jesus, and then, in yet another unique experience, through the Holy Spirit, after the death of Jesus.

In the beginning... was the Word... Let me offer one brief theological clarification. John does not say, “In the beginning... was Jesus.” John’s theological affirmation is that the power of God to express life, the divine logic behind the creation was present with God, from the beginning. Just as the wisdom literature of Proverbs speaks of “Lady Wisdom” existing with God from the beginning,⁵ John speaks of the Divine Logos – The Word of God – as pre-existent with God. When I hear people say something like, “Jesus created the world,” I always cringe a little. I don’t think so. This is not what John says. The Word was preexistent with God. Jesus of Nazareth was a first century man, who lived and died in the first century, in Israel. He wasn’t the carpenter of the cosmos – but John’s affirmation should be no less striking.⁶ He is the one in whom this Divine Word set up shop, as it were. “Pitched its tent,” *among us. And the Word became flesh* (this is where Jesus enters the picture) *and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth.*⁷

It is a startling affirmation. An offensive affirmation to many who believe God would never stoop, could never stoop to such low esteem. But this is the heart of Christian faith, this offense – the Word of God, God’s spirit and wisdom and logic and creative power... is with us. Again, from Gail O’Day, “The relationship between divine and human is transformed, because in the incarnation human beings are given intimate, palpable, corporeal access to the cosmic reality of God.”⁸

⁵ See Proverbs 1.22, 4.5-6 among others.

⁶ I may be splitting theological hairs here, but it is a distinction that I believe is important. To affirm that Jesus, the man of Nazareth, was pre-existent with God is surely to contradict his humanity. To be “fully human,” as traditional Christology affirms, seems to me to require something of a natural birth, and a natural death. John’s Gospel maintains this distinction, while also affirming the traditional “fully human – fully God,” affirmation of Christological confessions.

⁷ John 1.14 has been translated “*the Word became flesh and pitched its tent among us*” – an allusion to the Greek language, which echoes the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The word for “dwelt” is used in the Hebrew text referring to the Ark of the Covenant, which was transported through the land, and displayed for worship in the “tent of meeting.”

⁸ O’Day, p.526.

The Word of God, in human flesh. Sheer beauty. Unimaginable horror. It is the power of Christian confession. God is with us. The power of God. The creative force of God. The cosmic, world-evoking, life-giving source of God. With us. John could hardly have uttered a more inspiring word, a higher word of praise for who he believed Jesus was, because of who the church had experienced Jesus to be.

It is the affirmation of the Followers of Jesus: he was “Just the Right Word.”⁹

And what is so powerful about that word is the multiple layers of understanding. Scripture always speaks on more than one level. In this text there is the cosmic level – a theological affirmation about God and God’s inconceivable presence and power to create: *In the beginning... the Word was God*. There is the historical level – Jesus is the face of this inconceivable God: *The Word became flesh... and dwelt among us*. And there is the still-human, contemporary level... when we speak... our words, literally have the power to speak the Word.¹⁰

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It was the Right Word.

And when we speak the right words, in our own words the Word of God is made *flesh*, again. Even in our words, God *dwells among us*, still. May it be so!

⁹ Today’s bulletin included this quotation from Mark Twain: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it is the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.”

¹⁰ 1 Peter 4 urges: *Whoever speaks should do so as if they are speaking the very words of God*. The power to incarnate God for this world is, quite literally, in the power of our own words.